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AUTHOR Norum, Karen E.
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a specific form of qualitative research--narrative inquiry. In this form of research, peoples' stories become the data. The paper explores the power of narrative inquiry as a "heretical" research method and how it can be used to examine stakeholders' experiences and beliefs related to transforming a system; for example, the public education system. Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research that lends itself to "heresy." It creates a space for and values personal voice and the sharing of personal perspectives. It is through this type of research that people's stories are brought to the forefront and become the data. The uniqueness of divergent voices and the practical wisdom embedded in those voices is celebrated. (Contains 60 references.) (DFR)

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What Stories Tell:

Storying and Restorying Public Education

by

Karen E. Norum, Ph.D.
University of South Dakota
Division of Technology for Training and Development
Vermillion, South Dakota
knorum@usd.edu

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As with any generation, the oral tradition depends upon each person listening and remembering a portion, and it is together—all of us remembering what we have heard together—that creates the whole story, the long story of the people
~Silko, 1981, p. 6-7~

We like to tell stories. It is a very human thing to do and we all have stories. In fact, we "lead storied lives" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Narratives are created quite naturally as we make sense of and give meaning to events in our lives (Abma, 1999; Chase, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Cortazzi, 1993; Feige, 1999; Mattingly, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1988; Reason & Hawkins, 1988; Riessman, 1993). We are surrounded by narrative knowing as we learn to read stories in school, learn about important historical events, watch movies and TV shows, tell a friend or spouse how our day went (Polkinghorne, 1988). By telling stories, we remember our past, invent our present, revision our future, discover compassion and create community with kindred souls (Keen & Valley-Fox, 1973). "We think and see in terms of stories because we are stories" (Feige, 1999, p. 87).

Most all of us have stories about the education system because we have received an education. Because our country has a "public" education system and **we** are the "public," all of us are stakeholders in the system. We tell our stories about our experiences with the public education system to each other. For example, parents of school-age children carry on conversations about the schools their children attend. Childless taxpayers carry on conversations about the state of the education system and what their dollars are being used for. These stories have the power to transform the public education system by expanding our

imaginations and enlarging our vision of what could be (Feige, 1999). The stories told about a system guide its practices and policies (Abma, 1999; Cooperrider, 2000; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). These stories are socially constructed by the stakeholders in the system (Abma, 1999; Bushe, 2000). By changing the story, it is possible to change the system: stories reveal the thinking of the system and by changing the thinking, the system changes (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2000; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Senge, 1999).

In this paper, I will describe a specific form of qualitative research: narrative inquiry. In this form of research, people's stories become the data. I will explore its power as a heretical research method (Norum, 1998) and how it can be used to examine stakeholde s' experiences and beliefs related to transforming a system such as the public education system.

Narrative Inquiry

Method can be used to give voice and even encourage heresy: the deliberate attempt to bring divergent points of view on issues to the forefront (Levin & Riffel, 1997). Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research that lends itself to "heresy." It creates a space for and values personal voice and the sharing of personal perspectives (Greene, 1995; Munro, 1993). In this type of research, people's stories are brought to the forefront and become the data. The uniqueness of divergent voices and the practical wisdom embedded in those voices is celebrated. The door is opened for a polyphony of voices to be heard.

The form paints a different kind of picture, allowing for different and possibly new kinds of understandings to emerge (Barone & Eisner, 1997).

Life is informed and formed by stories (Widdershoven, 1993). Narratives occur naturally (Cortazzi, 1993) and help us make meaning of life's episodes (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Daloz, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995; Reason & Hawkins, 1988). It is quite common for people to explain their actions or relate an experience through telling a story. As we tell our stories, we also construct meaning: "We *make* our experience, not simply *have* it" (Eisner, 1991, p. 60). As a story is told and questions are asked, the meaning of the story becomes clearer for the teller as well as the listener(s). "People live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them and create new ones".(Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 415).

The stories we tell about the public education system "bring theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 3). Sharing our stories provides a way for listeners or readers to question their own stories, raise their own questions and see stories of their own stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989). The meaning of an experience is allowed to become manifest (Reason & Hawkins, 1988). We begin to understand how the narrative we have constructed about the public education system shapes its policies and practices (Abma, 1999; Cooperrider, 2000; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). Our collective knowledge of the human experience is increased (Bakan, 1996). Practical wisdom is embedded in people's stories (Fine, 1994; Schwandt, 1993) and that wisdom can be authentically engaged in conversations about educational systemic change (Norum, 1997).

The Heresy of Narrative Inquiry

It has been suggested that the problems with educational systemic change are fundamentally problems of the way we think, the assumptions we hold about education. If this is true, these problems need to be addressed through challenging our assumptions and changing our thinking (Levin & Riffel, 1997). Through narrative inquiry, we learn of people's stories, experiences, and perceptions, laying the foundation for new understandings and learning to emerge. When people are given the space to voice their perspectives along with a method to make their stories public, others can respond. In the process of sharing perspectives through sharing stories, people learn more about their own perspective and are able to re-evaluate its viability (Dixon, 1996). Specific experiences speak to one another: one person's experience elicits an emotional response in another or plays out aspects others might share (Krieger, 1991). The heresy of narrative inquiry is that it is a method that brings divergent points of view to bear on an issue or a situation (Norum, 1998).

We tell each other stories about our interactions with organizations, whether it is a retail store such as Nordstrom, or a governmental bureaucracy such as the IRS. The stories we tell reflect characteristics of the perceived referential core of that organization. Wheatley (1999) describes the referential core of a system as its "memory." It is what keeps the system from losing its integrity while allowing it to live on the "edge of chaos" by reaching out and taking on new forms (Wheatley, 1999). It is where the qualitative features of the system live (Capra, 1996). In the public education system, we seem to have lost track of this referential core as the purpose(s) for public education have become

more and more fragmented (Feige, 1999; Merz & Furman, 1997; Norum, 1997; Purpel, 1999). Postman (1995) states, "There was a time when American culture knew what schools were for because it offered fully functioning multiple narratives for its people to embrace" (p. 13). Examples of these narratives include educating citizens for a democracy; the great melting pot; instilling the [Protestant] work ethic (Postman, 1995). Now the public questions what schools are for and educators are unsure of their mission (Hargreaves, 1994; Merz & Furman, 1997). We must reclaim our organizations for the purposes we want them to serve (Wheatley & Whyte, 1996). If the organization we are reclaiming is the public education system, this means we must understand why and in what way education is vital to us (Bestor, 1995). This involves bringing divergent points of view to the forefront. Once we have identified why and in what way education is vital to us, we need to consider what we want the referential core of the educational system to be in the future.

We can reclaim the public education system and identify the purpose we want it to serve through sharing our stories and finding common ground in those stories. Capra tells us, "More than any other social species we engage in collective thinking, and in doing so we create a world of culture and values that becomes an integral part of our natural environment" (1982, p. 298). If we believe public schools belong to the entire community and should serve that community (Decker & Decker, 1988), we need to hear the community's stories. If we believe education is a system, including not only the school itself, but also the home and community, these perspectives (Hiemstra, 1972) must be brought to light. If "[e]ducation in any society is the reflection of the collective beliefs, aspirations, and cultural and ethical norms of its members" (Banathy, 1991, p. 29) and the

education system co-evolves with the societal system, as society changes, the education system needs to change (Banathy, 1992; Bateson, 1999; Capra, 1996; Feige, 1999; Hargreaves, 1994; Merz & Furman, 1997; Reigeluth, 1994; Sarason, 1990; Waddock, 1995; Wagner, 1993). To determine what it needs to change to, we need to identify the collective beliefs of society. We can identify these collective beliefs by sharing our stories. As we each share our story, we contribute a portion to the whole story, "the long story, of the people" (Silko, 1981, p. 7). The newly created long story can then be used to transform our vision of what is possible and create a map for a new destination (Daloz, 1986).

Storying and Restorying

"If we do not take ourselves seriously in terms of the collective decisions we make, it is possible our children's children will have to accept conditions of life that we would consider atrocious" (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998, p. 41). It is possible that if we do not seek out and listen to each other's stories about public education, our children's children will have to accept an education system we consider atrocious. The state of the public education system is a topic of concern. For all of our change efforts, we have simply managed to replace one bureaucracy with another (Merz & Furman, 1997). Our failure to understand the systemic nature of the education system means the changes we have managed to implement may have actually done more harm than good (Berliner & Biddle, 19995). This is an issue that frustrates many of us, consumes chunks of time in meetings and chunks of money, effects a broad array of stakeholders, has few or

no precedents for successful resolution, puts parties into conflict, and is in need of bold leadership and new initiatives (Weisbord, 1992). Banathy states we

> have not grappled with the essential nature of education as a society system; a system interacting with other societal systems, a system which is embedded in the rapidly and dynamically changing larger society (1991, p. 12).

We can begin to grapple with and redefine the issues by sharing our stories of our experiences with the public education system (Norum, 1997). "Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, with the stories that we dream or imagine or would like to tell" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 160). When these stories are invited, included, and heard in the discourse (Norum, 1997), individual viewpoints and opinions are exchanged (Jenlink & Carr, 1996). From these divergent perspectives, we can create a new long story, giving us access to a collective wisdom (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Isaacs, 1993, 1996; Silko, 1981).

If we create a new story for the public education system, we can change its destiny. "The words we use and the way we use them are powerful indicators of how we see, of our particular vision of reality" (Daloz, 1986, p. 233). Denzin (1997) tells us, "What is voiced or given a voice is also heard" (p. 40). Thus, the stories we tell give voice to how we think about the public education system. How we think about the public education system is "heard" in the form of practices and policies that govern it. The stories we tell are "fundamental to the way we work together, the decisions we make, and the results we create" (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998, p. 59).

The story currently being told of the public education system is a story about a system that no longer fits the needs of society. In the words of Sam

Seaborn, Deputy Director of Communications on the TV series, *The West Wing*: "We don't need little changes. We need gigantic, monumental changes" in the public education system (Sorkin, 2000). We can create gigantic, monumental changes and transform the system by creating and telling a new story. Narrative inquiry is a research method that lends itself to examining stakeholders' experiences and beliefs related to transforming a system such as the public education system. People's stories are the data in narrative inquiry; these stories contain trends, themes, and insights (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000) related to the public education system. As individual stories are woven into a "long" story of the public education system, collective wisdom emerges. The story of the current public education system is restoried, creating a new result. By changing the story, it is possible to change the system (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2000; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Senge, 1999). It is possible to create a map for a new destination.

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